

the *View* review

First in a new series in which Rosemary Staal looks at places to eat

Anokaa
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You have to admire the courage of a young man who puts his money where our mouths are. Solman Farsi did that six years ago – reckoning that if he'd judged it right, his cutting-edge restaurant would make such waves that it would be propelled onward and upward.

His judgment proved to be spot on. Anokaa – the word means 'exceptional' in Hindi – is now a local legend and one of Salisbury's business success stories.

It has tapped in to the inescapable fact that most Brits love a curry but don't always want a bellyful of chicken madras. What we get here instead is an exciting fusion cuisine in which some of the ingredients may be familiar but their subtle combination is not. Anokaa's melding of Indian and French styles results from a collaboration between Solman, a proponent of fresh, healthy food, and his executive chef, Ram Chandra Banjade, formerly of London's Cinnamon Club, aged only 28 and passionate about cooking.

With 90 covers and a smiling, enthusiastic staff who know exactly when to move in and when to back off, Anokaa welcomes diners seven days a week, for buffet lunch and evening dinner.

D and I visited on a Thursday, the night when a magician tours the tables, dispensing mirth and amazement with every deft move. A small boy near us wore a beatific smile and eyes the size of saucers. He must have thought he was in Harry Potter heaven.

There was a great buzz about the place but a good gap between tables means private conversations can be just that. I had cause to be grateful when, by chance, I twigged that our nearest neighbours were discussing reconstructive surgery.

Unable to compete, D and I discussed our pleasant surroundings, noting ceiling and walls in shades of coconut, saffron and turmeric, chrome and leather chairs and luxurious banquettes, wood floors and white-draped tables – very 21st century, very aspirational.

So to the food, and we were totally seduced by the menu. 'It all seems so wonderful, I'd like a bit of everything,' I said, betraying



Solman Farsi (front left) with some of his staff

two of my least appealing characteristics: indecisiveness and greed. Nevertheless, we (eventually) chose: for me, roasted wild king prawns marinated in yogurt, chilli oil and crushed fennel, and for D, Goan-style pot-roasted beef fillet strips seasoned with dry ginger and rosemary. What a great start. Flavours, some delicate, some more intense, primed our tastebuds for what was to come.

I decided on cottage cheese. No, not that dismal staple of serial dieters, but paneer, the tastier and more versatile Indian version. My makhana wala had barbecued cubes of paneer with asparagus and black cherries in tomato gravy flavoured with fenugreek leaves and cream of coconut. Not something you'd knock up in the kitchen for supper, I'd agree, but less fussy than it sounds and so good I didn't want it to end.

D had a similar faraway look of pure joy thanks to his Hara duck – lean breast strips with peppers, green chillies and spiced onions stir-fried in a hottish sauce with fresh coriander. He had a side-dish of potatoes with cumin and dill with his, while I had a deliciously fresh and vibrant salad of leaves and fruit.



Room for pudding? No, but in the interests of research D chose a zingy fruit salad, artfully laid out in the shape of a pineapple, and I managed half of a pleasantly unsweet blueberry sorbet and crème fraiche ice-cream.

Had Anokaa lived up to its name? Was it 'exceptional'? I can only answer that by asking how you say in Hindi 'absolutely wonderful'.

Our 3-course dinner, excluding wine: £52